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ABSTRACT

The study reported in this paper describes the first school encounters of four Hmong third-graders and their difficulties in adjusting to classroom learning activities. Three boys and one girl were chosen for observation. Two of the boys were classified as learning disabled, and the other two children were being considered for recommendation to the disability program but did not consistently exhibit disabled behavior. Using ethnographic research methods, especially participant observations and interviews, the study focused on how children become increasingly aware of their differences in cultural values and attempt to cope with the high stress levels they experience in school. Teachers, on the other hand, adhere to their own training and values and demand compliance with cultural norms of performance. The Hmong children under study showed deep frustration and hopelessness as they failed to engage meaningfully in learning activities. Suggestions for implementation of educational policies and practices dealing with Indochinese students are offered, and possible directions for future research are explored. (Author/MSE)

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CULTURAL DIFFERENCE OR DISABILITY: REDEFINING THE EXPERIENCE OF FOUR HMONG STUDENTS

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Lila Jacobs

This study describes the first school encounters of four Hmong children and their traumas over time as they attempt to belong and participate fully in classroom learning activities. Their low achievement levels are viewed by the school personnel as signs of learning disabilities. Using ethnographic research methods, especially participant observations and interviews, the study focuses on how children become increasingly aware of their differences in cultural values, and attempt to cope with the high levels of stress they experience in school. Teachers, on the other hand, adhere to their own training and values and demand compliance with cultural norms of performance. The Hmong children under study show deep frustration and hopelessness as they fail to engage meaningfully in learning activities. The study offers suggestions for the implementation of educational policies and practices which deal with Indochinese students, and explores possible directions for future research.

An area of growing concern for people involved with issues of equity is the relationship between language minority students and special education (Christensen, Gerber and Everhart, 1986; Rueda, 1987; Trueba, in press). The numbers of these children placed in learning disability programs are growing in disproportionate numbers. The time has come to search for the underlying causes of this phenomenon and to question the assumptions upon which the diagnoses are being made. Are great numbers of these children really handicapped, or are their cultural differences determining their placement in this category?

Setting

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The research site is located in a densely populated town in southern California. The population is equally divided between a university student community, and a minority community consisting of a growing number of Hispanics as well as a number of southeast Asian refugees. The Hmong people from Laos are part of this latter group.

As of 1986, the La Playa elementary school had 591 students. Over half

of these students - 298 children - speak a primary language other than English, with 24 languages represented. The largest ethnic group, other than Anglo, is formed by 136 Indochinese students, including 77 Hmong, 31 Laotian, and 28 Vietnamese.

Programs offered by the school include reading and language laboratory, a learning disability resource program, and Spanish/ English bilingual education. Part-time instructional aides and student teachers assist in the classrooms. Two psychological counselors are on site one day per week. While there are some Hispanic teachers, the largest number of school personnel is Anglo. There are no Asian adults employed by the school.

Sample

The four Hmong students under observation, all third graders, were referred for study by their teachers. Pao and Vang, two Hmong boys, were in the same classroom, reading group, and learning disability class. The other subjects were a male, Chou, and a female Song, who were together in another classroom, reading group, and lab.

Pao and Vang had been classified as learning disabled, while Chou and Song were being considered for recommendation to the disability program. Their teachers, the resource specialists, and the school psychologist agreed that these children did not correspond with the "normal picture" of learning disabled students. The perceptions of the school personnel concerning these four students were that their skill levels fluctuated randomly, and that they exhibited behaviors and coping strategies that did not fit into the school's definition of acceptable.

To better understand these Hmong refugees, it is necessary to include a short historical perspective. The events leading up to their present relocation in California are complex and they are an integral part of the cultural heritage and the psyche of the community members. The Hmong in this community left Laos after the U.S. troops pulled out and the Hmong military leader, Vang Pao (who had been trained by the U.S. CIA), fled to Thailand (Lee, 1982). Many of the La Playa Hmong made the journey to Thailand on foot, a difficult and treacherous undertaking.

The traumas of survival in these life or death circumstances continued into the refugee camp experience. The necessity of satisfying the conditions required by the U.S. Immigration authorities often called for altering the

roles of wives, ages of children, religious beliefs and family alliances. The trauma of entering unfamiliar settings and of degradation experiences continued into the resettlement journeys and persists today in the resocialization process of resettlement (Kirton, 1985).

Methodology

The observations took place over a two month period in which the researcher was on site daily for the entire school day. Classroom observations were divided by time periods, and at any one time period only one student was the unit of observation. Some time was also spent in the homes of the students while interviewing the parents.

In order to be as inclusive as possible, the research makes use of multiple ethnographic strategies (McDermott and Roth, 1978; Trueba and Wright, 1981; Spindler, 1982; Trueba, 1987). These include participant and non-participant observations, structured and non-structured interviews, and analysis of school files.

All interviews were audio-taped, and were conducted with each of the four students and with the two classroom teachers. At school, interviews were also done with the reading specialist, the learning disability resource teacher, the classroom aides, the student teachers, the language specialist, the school psychologist and the counselors. The parent interviews were done with the help of a translator who is fluent in the Hmong language and is a trained ethnographer.

Research Findings and Analysis

The research documents differential participation and skill levels of these four Hmong students in the specific context of their daily school tasks. Their different classrooms, reading groups, and resource classes, allowed observations of the students in diverse groups, and working with adults using different teaching strategies.

The theoretical frame used for analysis incorporates Vygotsky's (1978) theory of mediated learning. Fundamental to this perspective is the interactive nature of cultural transmission. The process results in acquisition or non- acquisition of the ability to understand and manipulate the symbolic systems of culture (D'Andrade, 1984; Trueba, in press).

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The Vygotskian framework also makes use of the "the zone of proximal development," rather than test scores, to determine what a student is capable of doing (Cole and Scribner, 1974; Vygotsky, 1978; Griffin, Trueba, in press). This zone is determined by the child's experience in a mediated learning situation involving both the teacher (or more knowledgeable peer) and the learner in a meaningful interaction. This interaction is impossible if the child is in isolation. Consequently, a strong linkage was seen in the relationship between participation and skill level; high levels of participation increased skill level and vice versa.

The four case studies reveal some important observations regarding emerging patterns of behavior and themes for discussion:

1) All four children have problems "tuning in" or paying attention and engaging in academic activities. They are bored, uninvolved, unaware, and often not participating at all. The causes for the lack of participation are multiple. It is likely that the lack of participation is the best coping mechanism available to children who do not find the academic tasks meaningful. Remarks made by children that "it is too hard" indicate that instruction is geared in format, content, and delivery to the mainstream child. Those who do not share mainstream language and culture are left behind at an increasing pace.

2) These children, to varying degrees, have all been uprooted and traumatized in the process of relocation, which contributes to the problem outlined above. The consequences of this have affected their physical and mental health as well as their entire family systems. Therefore, efforts to cope with the school are only part of the overall adjustment these children are making (McDermott and Hood, 1982; Trueba, 1983, 1985; Delgado-Gaitan, 1986). A more obvious manifestations of this process of adjustment is the dilemma between assimilation to the language and culture of the United States through rejection of Hmong language and culture.

3) Some of these children are classified as "learning disabled" even though school personnel can not articulate clearly the nature of their problems. The definition of learning disability is vague enough to allow for other factors to enter into the diagnosis. There is a process of "social construction" in the consensus of the school personnel. At times, the arguments used to initiate the classification are weak or false. At best, the ultimate argument made is that children cannot function in regular classrooms and cannot respond to instructional efforts conducted in English. However, there is a relatively rigid curriculum with a content which is foreign

to other than mainstream children, and there is a participation structure which tends to isolate or demoralize students who ignore the cultural or linguistic norms of the school.

The nature of the educational system, including the pressures exerted on classroom teachers and school psychologists, makes it seem that classifying a low achieving child as "learning disabled" is the only option available. There are, however, important differences in children's performances to caution psychologists and teachers from using general labels and from accepting the implications attached to such labels.

Home and School Culture

This research also documents the conflict between values of the home and those demanded by the school. In the Hmong refugee community, the main concern of the family has been basic survival. High rents, medical problems, low income, access to information through translation, and transportation problems are the major concerns of the family. Money is a crucial element of survival, and consequently all adults in a household usually work if they can find employment. This leaves childcare and chores to the grandparents and older children, competing with time for study and homework.

In addition, most parents do not have a concrete idea of what their children learn in U.S. classrooms and thus invest the teachers and the schools with a "magical ability" to teach the children "everything there is to know." Although the parents verbally support the importance of the school, they have little substantive knowledge of what would help their children to be successful in the educational process.

The school experience of the parents has little in common with what happens in the schools their children now attend. The status of teachers in their home country made communication between teacher and parent impossible, and the Hmong parents continue to operate from this frame of reference. Stories about schools in Laos, told by Hmong parents, provided insight as to why parents are so happy with U.S. schools. They said that in Laos, teachers inflicted harsh punishment--making children kneel on pointed rocks or making a friend inflict lashes on another student.

Lack of English skills further adds to the lack of understanding between parents and teachers. All the parents in this study indicated that no

translator was available during school conferences, and that they did not understand what the teachers were saying. This later appeared on school files as, "Parents did not react or seem concerned." Teachers were not aware of the language and cultural barriers, and falsely interpreted silence as lack of interest.

Conclusions

The data presented has helped to explain the complexity of the adjustment process that Hmong children have to make in order to be able to learn effectively. The cultural and linguistic differences are so great that they affect profoundly all instructional activities. School personnel tend to oversimplify the task of helping these children, and they tend to fail to comprehend that many of these children cannot function in the present classrooms. Consequently, they surmise that the children must be disabled. In some instances school personnel have important information regarding the traumatic history of relocation of these Hmong families, but cannot understand why some children take longer to adjust than others.

Classroom teachers do not accept that one to one contact with students is a viable means of teaching (Iannacconne, 1963). This is viewed as tutoring, a mode of teaching left to the aides. The result is that the children with most needs are left to work with the least skilled adults.

Given these circumstances, children seek to adjust in a number of ways. Some children withdraw and remain isolated, others attempt to overcompensate with anxious overparticipation, while others fight back (Trueba, 1983). The Hmong children are culturally more inclined to select the first two alternatives. A significant implication of this study is that without the appropriate intervention by school personnel, the problems of these children will only get worse. Their increasing deterioration in participation and performance levels has been observed over a period of time. One reason for this deterioration process is the high emotional cost for children who attempt to maintain a high level of engagement in school activities while their efforts yield very few learning and success rewards.

As mentioned earlier the problem of adjustment for these students is further complicated by the often well-intentioned but ineffectual home support, due to the parents' lack of familiarity with the culture of the schools. It is apparent that without a viable support system in the home, these students will continue to fail. Just as importantly, parents who cannot

provide that support suffer diminished respect in the eyes of their children, causing a breakdown in traditional family systems.

As the students fall behind in their work, more pressure is placed on them to "catch up." Instead of trying new strategies the tendency is to "push harder" using the same unsatisfactory methods, thus producing the same unsatisfactory results. When this happens, an amplification of the stress occurs, as illustrated by Song's behavior in her constant over-erasing and her manner of speaking in a barely audible whisper. Participating without the skills to perform successfully becomes traumatic, and withdrawal is a natural response to a painful experience.

The case study of Pao, who will not even look at the teacher, is also a classic example of withdrawal. By cutting himself off from the teacher and the classroom experience, the opportunity to learn is no longer available to him. Withdrawal and isolation are part of the vicious cycle of academic failure, and unless a positive intervention is made, the factor of time becomes a negative variable, and the achievement remains on a negative course of decline.

Positive reinforcement, cooperative learning, self-esteem, motivation, and the cultural relevance of instructional material played an important role in the engagement or lack of it for these students. Pao's case illustrates this point. In the classroom group he was completely disengaged, but working in a one to one situation or writing in his private journal Pao showed a dramatic difference in his abilities. Increased levels of competency were manifested when he was engaged in meaningful interactions with the teacher and tasks.

Implications of the Research

Many issues have emerged from this study that current research must address. They include: problems specific to the refugees, the education of teachers for crosscultural classrooms, and the empowerment of culturally and linguistically different parents to take an active role in their children's education. Furthermore, there are notable implications for teacher education and school administration.

Specifically, results of this research deal with the policies that govern the learning disability programs in the schools. The current trend of placing language minority and culturally different children in these programs is typified at La Playa School, resulting in a over-representation of minority

children in these programs. The data reveal a lack of clarity and inconsistency in the use of the learning disability label. The common characteristics of these children indicate that they do not fit into the parameters of the performance and behaviors expected in the classroom.

Unless interventions to halt the cycle of academic failure are employed, alienation and withdrawal will continue to lead to isolation for linguistic minority students. This will result in a dropout process beginning at the elementary school level. Solutions other than labeling children learning disabled must be initiated to allow meaningful mediated learning experiences that are relevant to students, regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

The study clearly indicates that students are not individually responsible for their alienation and increased isolation, but that they function as part of a system that includes the entire school, the community, and the larger society. The observations reflected in this study are manifestations of a systemic failure. Unless this is recognized, and withdrawal and isolation are seen as crucial factors interfering with the learning process, appropriate interventions will not be discovered. Rather, there will be more of what is happening now, inaccurate labeling of children in an attempt to rid the classroom of "misfits".

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